

VZCZCXRO3188
OO RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR
DE RUEHAN #0570/01 1511342
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 311342Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2887
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0657
RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 0041
RUEHDR/AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM 0034
RUEHPL/AMEMBASSY PORT LOUIS 0197
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA CAMP LEMONIER
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J2X/J4/J5//

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ANTANANARIVO 000570

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [OVIP](#) [ECON](#) [CN](#)
SUBJECT: U.S. MEETS COMOROS' NEW LEADERSHIP

REF: A) ANTANANARIVO 519;
b) ANTANANARIVO 473 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (U) This cable is the second of a three-part cable. The first describes the inauguration of President Sambi, attended by the U.S. Presidential Delegation. This cable describes the Delegation's meetings with and assessment of the new government. The third cable provides suggestions for U.S. policy toward the new government of the Union of the Comoros.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY. A U.S. Presidential Delegation attended the May 26 inauguration of Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi as President of the Union of the Comoros. Following the inauguration Sambi and some of his top advisors met with the U.S. officials and conveyed their desire for friendly relations with the United States as well as a willingness to continue cooperating in the war on terror. They listened carefully to suggestions for launching their new government and requested assistance in doing so. The new government has only six ministers, a remarkable slimming down from the previous government's fourteen. Significantly, given the President's reputation as a conservative Muslim, one of the six ministers is a woman. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (U) The week after his decisive electoral victory (reftels), Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi was officially inaugurated as Comoran President in a festive ceremony May 26 (septel). The peaceful and democratic transfer of power from former President Azali to President Sambi was the first in Comoros' 31-year history. A Presidential Delegation led by USAID Deputy Director Frederick W. Schieck, including USAID Counselor Mosina Jordan and Ambassador James D. McGee, attended the inauguration and associated events. The U.S. presence was enhanced by the attendance of Rear Admiral Richard W. Hunt, Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) and his staff, and EmbOffs.

President Sambi Receives Presidential Delegation

¶4. (SBU) An energetic and warm President Sambi spent a full hour with Delegation Head Schieck and Counselor Jordan May
¶27. Sambi clearly appreciated the significance of the

Delegation's presence and gratefully accepted the gift from the White House, noting it was "historic" as the first gift he had received from a President. He reiterated his desire for continued friendship with the United States, asking for help to prove democracy and independence in Comoros will lead to prosperity.

¶5. (SBU) In response to Schieck's request for continued support in the fight against terrorism, President Sambi stated firmly, "I am on your side." Sambi added that poverty is the enemy, even with the moderate and peaceful Comorans because, "sometimes desperate people can be convinced to do things." He requested development assistance so he could alleviate his peoples' suffering and eliminate the potential for such tragic consequences.

¶6. (SBU) Sambi further elaborated that, as a theologian who had spent time many years ago in Sudan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, he understood the danger of radical ideology. He stated he would never allow schools teaching hate or intolerance to operate in the Comoros.

Hungry For Advice: Senior Advisor at Dinner

¶7. (SBU) President Sambi sent his advisor, Ombad Morhan, to join the Delegation for dinner May 27 to explore in more detail the new government's program. Morhan emphasized near-term challenges, like organizing national exams in June. This is a problem because unpaid teachers in Grand Comore are still on strike, and the new government is anxious to avoid yet another lost school year. He added that the government would audit government accounts and assess

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egregious cases of corruption in the coming two weeks. Judicial reform would begin with transparency, by holding former officials accountable, and by taking on graft of magistrates. He acknowledged that Sambi's somewhat aggressive plan will require substantial and immediate technical support to succeed.

¶8. (SBU) After outlining a few top priorities and challenges, Morhan switched to listening mode, feverishly taking notes for 90 minutes while Schieck and Jordan offered advice on engaging donors, establishing credibility, and getting the government running. An exhausted and visibly exhilarated Morhan took careful note of advice that the new government should engage the World Bank, request an audit, follow up on the December Port Louis donor's conference with co-hosts Mauritius and South Africa, and above all create a credible work plan with concrete activities that partner nations can support.

¶9. (SBU) Sambi was chosen as a national candidate through the primary in Anjouan, in a constitutional system designed to rotate the Presidency among the three islands of the Comoros. Nonetheless, Morhan confirmed that Sambi's government would reside permanently in Moroni, the Union capital on the island of Grand Comore. Morhan added that Sambi's wife would remain with their children in Anjouan where she had been running the family businesses since her husband announced his candidacy.

Pull-Aside with CJTF-HOA Admiral Hunt

¶10. (SBU) Eager to meet the U.S. delegation, President Sambi separately set time for a pull-aside with Rear Admiral Hunt late the evening of May 26. Sambi confirmed his willingness for continued cooperation with the United States on security, and took particular interest in the upcoming international maritime conference to be held in Antananarivo in July. The President also welcomed Admiral Hunt's offer for a team to come to the Comoros to repair schools or clinics on a humanitarian mission.

Sambi Names Cabinet of Six; Including a Woman

¶11. (U) Wasting no time following the inauguration, President Sambi announced his cabinet May 29. In contrast to the 14 ministers and 40 advisors that former President Azali had on his payroll, Sambi named just six of each, with his Chief of Staff and two Vice-Presidents - one from each of the "non-presidential" islands -- also taking on ministerial assignments. Significantly, given the pre-election claims by his opponents that Sambi would prove an Islamic "extremist," one of the six ministers in his Cabinet is a woman.

¶12. (U) The Ministers are as follows:

- Idi Nadhoim, Sambi's Vice President from Grand Comore, will also be Minister of Transportation, Posts and Communications, Telecommunications, and Tourism;
- Ikililou Dhoinine, Sambi's Vice-President from Moheli, will have the Health portfolio as well as Solidarity and Gender Empowerment;
- Mohamed Abdoulwahabi, Sambi's Chief of Staff and reportedly a close confidant, will have the Defense portfolio;
- Ahmed Ben Said Jaffar, Foreign Minister and Minister of Cooperation, who will also have charge of the Comoran diaspora;
- Hassan Hamadi who will have the portfolios of Finance, Budget, the Economy, Planning, and Labor (employment generation);
- M'Madi Ali, in charge of Public Administration, Administrative Reforms and Prisons;
- Nailane Mhadji, has Energy, Land Management, Urbanization and Housing;

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- Abdourahim Said Bacar, who will also serve as Government Spokesman, has Education, Research, Youth and Sports, Arts and Culture;
- Siti Kassim, the lone woman in the Cabinet, will be Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Industry, Handicrafts, and the Environment.

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT. It is far too early to draw definite conclusions about the Sambi Administration, however the early signs are positive. He is seeking to fulfill his promise of a leaner and clear regime and we have been told that his selections have a reputation for competence and professionalism. We have heard also that he has cut in half the President's salary in a move that may not be so difficult for a relatively wealthy businessman, but that will certainly enhance his popularity. Most importantly, in his meetings he sent a clear signal of his desire for good relations with - and assistance from - the United States.
END COMMENT.

¶14. (U) Deputy Administrator Schieck and Counselor Jordan cleared on the general substance of this message before their departure from Comoros.

MCGEE